Materials to Develop Microskills and Macroskills: Are There Any Principles?

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Abstract: This paper introduces the concepts of microskills and macroskills mostly used in materials development and language teaching, the former being a set of subskills or enabling skills or part skills delineating skills at the sentence level and the latter designating skills at the discourse level comprising listening, speaking, reading and writing. The paper holds that this formulation is actually essential to determine in details the kind of things our learners need to learn and perform. However, pointing out that these skills cannot be pigeon-holed in a clear-cut atomistic way, it later attempts to address the principles mostly inspired from SLA as well as teaching and learning theories which are needed to be taken into consideration while developing materials. It, moreover, asserts that in the case of deficiencies in the curriculum, it is also the competent and qualified teachers who can often compensate for the materials they utilize in their teaching.

Index Terms: microskills, macroskills, principles, SLA theory.

INTRODUCTION

The history of curriculum development in language pedagogy initiated in the 1960s though issues of syllabus design emerged much earlier standing as a major factor in language teaching (Richards, 2001). To assert that material writing and developing is a professional undertaking, a good material developer should be able to

- select materials from what is available,
- be creative,
- modify activities according to the learner’ needs, and
- supplement materials by providing extra activities.

This is the perspective held by Harwood (2010) who also believes that in developing materials, one needs to determine his approach, design, and procedure, the terminology first introduced by Richards and Rodgers in the realm of language education in 2001. In this formulation, approach refers to the nature of language, and of language learning and teaching; design, specifies the content, the roles of teachers, learners, and materials; and procedure determines the variety of pedagogical activities that can be drawn on in language pedagogy.

MATERIALS TO DEVELOP MICROSKILLS

Brown (2007) states that Richards in 1983, in a seminal article, has introduced a comprehensive taxonomy of aural skills, termed microskills, later adapted by Brown and discussed under the notions of microskills and macroskills; the former designates skills at the sentence level, the latter, however, delineates skills at the discourse level. Brown further adds
that such formulation is essential to determine in details the kind of things our learners need to learn and perform. In Brown's terms, "as you plan a specific technique [...] it helps you to focus on clearly conceptualized objectives. And in your evaluation of listening [for example], these micro- and macroskills can become testing criteria" (p. 307). Also according to Richards and Schmidt (2002, 2010), micro-skills are a set of subskills or enabling skills or part skills (in language teaching), the terms sometimes major used to refer to the individual processes and abilities which are applied in carrying out a complex activity.

Furthermore, there are, three major ways of defining subskills. One is to look at the range of activities covered by a skill such as speaking and to use these as a starting point for defining subskills (Alderson, 2000; Morrison et al, 2001; Munby, 1978 ; Robinson, 2009; Tomlinson, 2010, 2011). For example, speaking can be divided into interactional speaking and transactional speaking. Transactional speaking can then be divided into monologue, dialogue, etc.

Another way is to look at the skill as a process and to divide it into the parts of the process. This is a typical way of approaching writing, dividing the writing process into parts. One possible division of the process is: (1) having a model of the reader, (2) having writing goals, (3) gathering ideas, (4) organizing ideas, (5) turning ideas into written text, (6) reviewing what has just been written, and (7) editing the written text. Process divisions can be applied in other skills.

Still a third way of dividing up a skill is to use levels of cognitive activity. The most well-known approach of this kind can be found in what is popularly known as Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Bloom divides cognitive activity into six levels of increasing complexity: (1) knowledge, (2) comprehension, (3) application, (4) analysis, (5) synthesis, (6) evaluation. These levels have often been applied to the construction of reading comprehension activities (Brown, 2001).

On the basis of the most commonly-addressed model among these definitions—type one—dealing with the range of activities covered by any skill, for example, listening to a lecture, the following subskills or microskills are recognized: identifying the purpose and scope of the lecture; identifying the role of conjunctions, etc., in signaling relationships between different parts of the lecture; and recognizing the functions of pitch and intonation. For the purpose of syllabus design, the four macroskills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening may be further analyzed into different micro-skills.

Brown (2004) states that oral production, for example, requires the following microskills:
1. Making differences among English phonemes and allophones,
2. Producing varying chunks,
3. Producing English stress patterns, rhythms, and intonation patterns,
4. Producing reduced forms,
5. Using an adequate number of lexical units to accomplish pragmatic purposes,
6. Producing fluent speech,
7. Monitoring one’s own oral production and using various strategies to enhance the clarity of speech,
8. Using elliptical forms,
9. Producing speech in natural patterns,
10. Paraphrasing, and
11. Using cohesive devices in spoken discourse (see also Scrivener, 2011).

In further delineation of language subskills, Nation and Macalister (2010) also assert that reading courses, for example, may focus on subskills such as finding the gist, scanning reading, note-taking, skimming, fast reading, and reading for inferences (for more details see Grabe, 2009)

The microskills for writing skill have also been enumerated by Brown (2007, p. 399) in this way:
1. Producing graphemes and orthographic patterns,
2. Producing writing at an efficient speed,
3. Producing acceptable number of words and order patterns,
4. Using appropriate grammatical rules, and
5. Paraphrasing ability.
However, one important point put forth by Nunan (1989) is that the subskills which follow the main skills are not to be dealt with separately; they are required to be taught in close connection with the main skills. The important point, however, is that the arrangement of these subskills should not be in a linear fashion. They need to be repeated in different but meaningful combinations to form a spiral type of syllabus and thus be predicated on the findings of second language acquisition (SLA).

Rod Ellis (2010, p. 33) also maintains the need for drawing inspiration from SLA in writing materials. He further considers two ways in which second language acquisition research has informed language teaching materials:

- The design of the tasks
- Grammar teaching

In spite of delineating the microskills and the likelihood of the assessment of macroskills by these microskills, Brown (2007, p. 318) believes that "when it comes to assessing skills, we're pretty well stuck with reliance on our best inference [emphasis added] in determining comprehension. How you do that, and remain as accurate in your assessment as possible, is the challenge of assessing listening".

**MATERIALS TO DEVELOP MACROSKILLS**

As it is evident from the previous section, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are considered as the four *macro*skills which are further analyzed into microskills for the purposes of *syllabus design* (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, 2010; see also Scrivener, 2011). Richards and Schmidt further add that in language teaching, these are generally called the four *language skills*; sometimes *speaking and writing* are referred to as active/productive skills and *reading and listening* as passive/receptive skills.

In discussing skills syllabus, Richards (2001) remarks:

It is organized around the different underlying abilities involved in using a language for purposes such as reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Approaching a language through skills is based on the belief that learning a complex activity such a listening to a lecture involves mastery of a number of individual skills or microskills that together make up the activity. (p. 159)

As Kumaravadivelu (2003) maintains, during the heyday of language-centered methods, *language skills* were taught separately, a trend that has very little empirical or theoretical justification. As he furthers, the nature of L2 learning involves not merely an integration of linguistic components of language, but also an integration of language skills. It is true that the four language skills are still widely used in isolation as the fundamental organizing principle for *curricular and materials design* but it is more for *logistical* than for *logical* reasons.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts that *language skills* are essentially interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Fragmenting them into manageable, atomistic items runs counter to the parallel and interactive nature of language and language behavior. Besides, the learning and use of any one skill can trigger cognitive and communicative associations with the others. Exposure to reading, for instance, may be the primary means of developing reading comprehension, writing style, and more sophisticated vocabulary and grammar. Similarly, listening activities help to make the broader connection between an integrated sociolinguistic concept of form and function and psycholinguistic processes of interpretation and expression. Furthermore, as we learn from the whole-language movement, language knowledge and language ability are best developed when language is learned and used holistically (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

In order to ensure that a language program is coherent and systematically moves learners along the path towards that level of proficiency they need, as Richards (1990) maintains, some overall perspective of the development path is required. This need resulted, for the first time, in the development of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLRP) thereby defining levels of second language proficiency at nine (potentially twelve) points ranging from zero to native-like proficiency. Richards (1990) adds that such definitions provide detailed descriptions of language behavior in all *four macroskills* thus allowing the syllabus designers to perceive the manner in which varying courses at any level fit into the total
In general, the status of the microskills and macroskills in language curriculum development is delineated by Richards (2001) in this way:

Skills have traditionally been a central focus in language teaching and there have been attempts to identify the microskills underlying the use of the four macroskills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking as a basis for syllabus design. Skills-based syllabuses have the advantage of focusing on performance in relation to specific tasks and therefore provide a practical framework for designing courses and teaching materials. They may be more relevant to situations in which students have very specific and identifiable needs. (p. 141)

### WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES?

As Tomlinson (2012) states, recent publications on materials development have focused more on the application of theory to aspects of materials development. Tomlinson refers to one of his books written in 2007 being primarily about language acquisition but many of its chapters include applications of theory to materials development.

Evans, James Hartshorn, and Anderson (2010) also assert that developing reading materials for ELT practitioners requires being guided by sound theory and principles. These researchers emphasize the three principles of responsiveness, cohesion, and stability for developing content-based material for the skill of reading (see also Farhady, 2005).

Harwood (2010) believes that "materials writers will wish to consult the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, especially when considering which language structures to focus on, and how and when to present them" (p. 5). As he further identifies, materials developers should also address considerations of authentic English justified for nonnative speakers to inform the language curriculum. On the basis of his assertion, because of the lower number of the native speakers of English around the world, non-natives are far more likely in need of speaking English with other non-natives. The question then pops up as to “whether and to what extent these Englishes spoken in the expanding circle should be governed by those of the inner circles” (p. 6).

In considering the principles of effective material development, Tomlinson (2011) takes the position that "language learning materials should ideally be driven by learning and teaching principles rather than be developed ad hoc or in imitation of best-selling textbooks” (p. 81). Tomlinson then refers to 15 principles for material development which he has proposed in 1998 that derive from SLA research and experience, and then stresses 6 of these which are more crucial to him as follows:

- Exposing learners to authentic use of language
- Helping learners to exercise attention to features of authentic input
- Providing the learners with opportunities to use L2 to achieve communicative purposes
- Providing learners with opportunities for outcome feedback
- Achieving impact to arouse and sustain the learners attention and curiosity
- Stimulating intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional involvement

The principles developed by curriculum writers enumerated by Nation and Maclister (2010) are 20 each of which is supported by research and theory in any of the fields: second or foreign language learning, first language learning, and general educational research and theory. These are frequency, strategies and autonomy, spaced retrieval, language system, teachability, learning burden, interference, motivation, fluency, learning styles, feedback, and a few others. Harmer (2001, cited in McDonough & Shaw, 2003; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013) also refers to the principles of learnability, frequency, coverage, and usefulness. To White (1998) values and options are crucial for language curriculum development. By values he means ‘transmission of an esteemed cultural heritage which stresses the growth and self-realization of the individual’ as well as ‘an instrument of social change’ (p. 24).

Myles (2002) sees needs analysis as the logical starting point for the development of a language program being responsive to the learner and language needs.
Also Richards (2001) discussing the principles for developing ESP materials asserts as the following:

An important principle of ESP approaches to language teaching is that the purpose for which a learner needs a language rather than a syllabus reflecting the structure of general English should be used in planning an English course. Rather than developing a course around an analysis of the language, an ESP approach starts instead with an analysis of the learner’s needs. (p. 138)

This perspective is, however, rejected by Basturkmen (2006) maintaining that until very recently, the task of ESP was to investigate and analyze students’ needs because "it was assumed that the demands of the target environment were fixed, and these were represented as facts of the matter". (p.145). He further explains that this conventional outlook of ESP has been challenged. "Those advocating a critical role for ESP teaching wish to offer a different type of help. They argue that the demands of the target environment can and sometimes should be adapted to better meet the needs of the nonnative speaker would-be members" (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 145).

In discussing the role of teachers in materials developed for macroskills, Richards (2013) discerns that many things can be done to create a context for good teaching but it is teachers themselves who ultimately determine the success of a program. Good teachers can often compensate for deficiencies in the curriculum, the materials or the resources they make use of in their teaching. He adds that language teaching institutions vary greatly in the type of teachers they employ. In some situations, there may be a choice between native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English with different levels of English language proficiency. Within both groups there may be further choices possible based on teaching experience and professional qualifications. Views concerning the appropriate qualifications of language teachers have changed in recent years as the field of TESOL has become more professionally demanding of itself and has sought to develop standards for language teachers. There is a much greater awareness today that an expert language teacher is a highly skilled professional.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

There are varying second language learning and teaching theories as well as a surfeit of approaches, techniques, syllabuses, the appreciation of each of which can be regarded as the fundamental responsibility of the instructors and practitioners involved. However, regardless of the choice of the elements mentioned, acquaintance with the principles of materials development and systems framework for curriculum development has been shown to be beneficial in implementing a robust curriculum as well. Evidently, underscoring factors such as needs analysis, goals, content and sequencing, supported by research and theory, will assist in producing good results in the process but it is important to note that there are unluckily cases in which materials are developed by those who bear the slightest knowledge of the principles of material development and still embark on this crucial task.

Moreover, teachers are a key factor in the successful instruction of the materials designed. Exceptional teachers often enjoy the capacity and ability to compensate for the poor-quality resources and materials they are needed to tackle. But inadequately trained teachers may fail to make effective use of the instructional materials no matter how well they are designed. In any institution, teachers may vary according to the following dimensions:

- language proficiency
- teaching experience
- skill and expertise
- training and qualifications
- morale and motivation
- teaching style
- beliefs and principles

In substantiating a language program it is therefore critical to be cognizant of the materials to be drawn on as well as the
kinds of teachers the program will depend on in order to achieve its goals. In this regard, Ur (2012) has nicely put it saying that "the best materials are undoubtedly those written by authors who are themselves practicing teachers or have had extensive teaching experiences" (p. 295).

REFERENCES


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